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ABSTRACT

Examined were changes in students' positive and negative perceptions of junior high as they made the transition from sixth to seventh grade and the relation of students' perceptions to their social and academic adjustment. A total of 100 students were interviewed in the spring of their sixth-grade year, the fall of their seventh-grade year, and the spring of their seventh-grade year, to determine how they felt about the transition they were making and what they liked and disliked most about junior high. Students' grades, disruptive behavior, and aggression were also assessed at each time of interview. Findings indicated that concerns about victimization and disruptions in friendships declined sharply after the transition, while concerns about schoolwork and the new school setting increased over the year. Sex differences in reasons for disliking junior high were also found. Changes in students' perceptions were related to individual differences in adjustment. Before the transition, students with higher grades had more negative expectations while aggressive and disruptive students mentioned few concerns about the move. These patterns of perceptions reversed when students entered the seventh grade. It is concluded that the findings illustrate the importance of a longitudinal perspective in understanding the challenges students face during the transition to junior high. (Author/RH)

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STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE TRANSITION TO JUNIOR HIGH: A LONGITUDINAL PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to examine changes in students' positive and negative perceptions of junior high as they made the transition from 6th to 7th grade, and to relate these perceptions to their social and academic adjustment. One hundred students were interviewed in Spring 6th grade, Fall 7th grade, and Spring 7th grade on how they felt about the transition and what they liked and disliked most about junior high. Students' grades, disruptive behavior, and aggression were also assessed at each time.

Results indicated that concerns about victimization and disruptions in friendships declined sharply after the transition while concerns about schoolwork and the new school setting increased over the year. Sex differences in reasons for disliking junior high were also found. Changes in students' perceptions were also related to individual differences in adjustment. Before the transition, students with higher grades had more negative expectations while aggressive and disruptive students mentioned few concerns about the move. However, these patterns of perceptions were reversed once students entered 7th grade. These results illustrate the importance of a longitudinal perspective in understanding the challenges students face during the transition to junior high.

INTRODUCTION

Students' perceptions represent an insider's view of the challenges adolescents face as they make the transition to junior high, yet little is known about how these perceptions change over time or how they mirror students' own adjustment. Previous research has found disruptions in friendship (Mitman & Packer, 1982), increased academic demands (Eccles, Midgley, & Adler, 1984), and victimization and anonymity in the new school (Simmons & Blyth, 1987) to be major concerns for students as they enter junior high. To what extent do these concerns represent temporary challenges rather than enduring problems? Apart from these negative concerns, what aspects of the transition do students find rewarding and enjoyable? Also, past research has identified a number of factors that may impede adjustment to the transition, including low academic achievement and behavior problems (Simmons & Blyth, 1987). To what extent are these factors related to, and predictive of, students' own evaluations of junior high?

The present study was designed to address these questions by 1) examining students' perceptions using a short term longitudinal design, 2) focusing on positive as well as negative perceptions, and by 3) relating students' perceptions to individual differences in social and academic adjustment.

METHOD

Subjects were 100 6th graders (48 girls and 52 boys) from a primarily white, middle class suburban community.

Procedure All assessments were done in April of 6th grade, and again in November and April of 7th grade.

Assessments:

Perceptions of Junior High were derived from student interview responses to 3 open-ended questions: 1) how they felt about junior high, 2) what they liked most about junior high, and 3) what they disliked most about junior high. Ratings of junior high (question 1) were coded as positive, undecided, or negative. Perceptions (questions 2 & 3) were coded according to valence and type of concern:

Peer Relations ("I can meet new people"; "I'll miss my friends")

Academics ("I like gym class"; "There's too much homework")

School Setting ("I like changing classes"; "The school is crowded")

Responsibility ("We can do more things for ourselves")

Victimization ("The ninth graders push you around")

Social and Academic Adjustment:

Grades reading and math levels (6th grade) and GPA (7th grade)

Disruptiveness teacher ratings on the Devereux Elementary Behavior Rating Scale (Spivak & Swift, 1966).

Aggression peer nominations on the Revised Class Play (Masten, Morison, & Pelligrini, 1985).

Results and Discussion

Changes in Perceptions of Junior High

Repeated measures MANOVA were used to examine changes in the frequencies of students' positive and negative perceptions. Results for negative perceptions (Figures 1a & 1b) show different patterns for boys and girls. After the transition, girls' concerns about peer relations declined significantly, yet remained low for boys. Similarly, boys' concerns about victimization dropped significantly, yet remained low for girls. In contrast, boys' concerns about academics increased sharply, matching the level of girls' concerns, which were continually high. Concerns about the new school setting increased dramatically for both boys and girls. For all students, academics became the primary reason for disliking junior high.

Results for positive perceptions (Figure 2) show that, for both boys and girls, comments about peer relations decreased significantly by the fall of 7th grade. Over the transition period, academics, responsibility, and, especially, the new school setting became primary reasons for liking junior high.

These results suggest that, whereas students' expectations focused on adapting to the social world of junior high, their subsequent evaluations were most closely linked to liking or disliking academics and the new school setting. The decline in concerns about peers suggests that most students adjusted to this challenge quite readily. However, academics and the school setting itself continued to be major concerns, suggesting that these aspects of the transition represent more enduring challenges.

Relations of Adjustment to Perceptions of Junior High

Prior to the transition, students with better grades mentioned the greatest number of concerns about the move. (Table 1) In contrast, more disruptive and aggressive students mentioned the fewest concerns. These patterns were reversed once they got to 7th grade. After the transition, students with better grades now mentioned the most reasons for liking junior high. More disruptive students, however, mentioned the fewest reasons for liking junior high once they entered 7th grade. There were no significant relations between students' adjustment and their perceptions of junior high at the end of 7th grade.

However, by the spring of 7th grade, both aggressive and disruptive students rated the transition more negatively than any other students. (Table 2) Furthermore, being viewed as disruptive and aggressive consistently predicted negative ratings of junior high both 5 months (Fall 7th - Spring 7th) and 12 months (Spring 6th - Spring 7th) later.

The results suggest that, fortunately, the initial concerns of academically able students were unwarranted. Unfortunately, aggressive and disruptive sixth graders, who presumably had the most to gain from a change in their situation, were least concerned with, and probably least prepared for, the challenges they would face. These findings suggest that efforts to improve the adjustment of these children and prevent further school alienation should take place before the transition to junior high.

CONCLUSIONS

1. **Concerns about peer relations (girls) and victimization (boys) declined after the transition; concerns about academics and the new school setting increased. Boys, especially, seemed unaware of the academic challenges they would face in junior high.**
2. **Friendships and peer relations were the primary reasons for looking forward to the transition; the new school setting became the primary reason for liking junior high once they arrived in 7th grade.**
3. **Aggressive and disruptive students were initially unconcerned about junior high, yet became increasingly negative about their school experience over the course of the transition. Aggression and disruptiveness in 6th grade predicted negative evaluations of junior high 12 months later.**

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Figure 1a
Changes in Negative Concerns* (Girls)

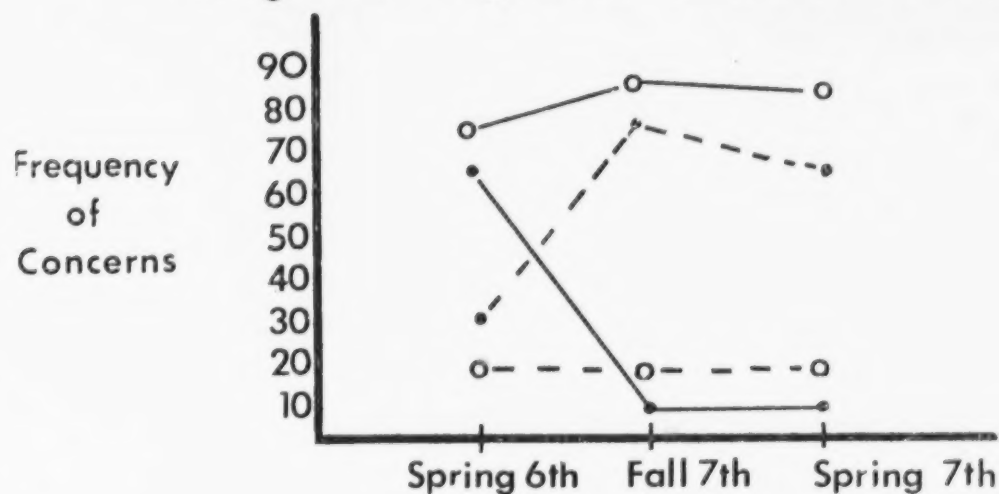
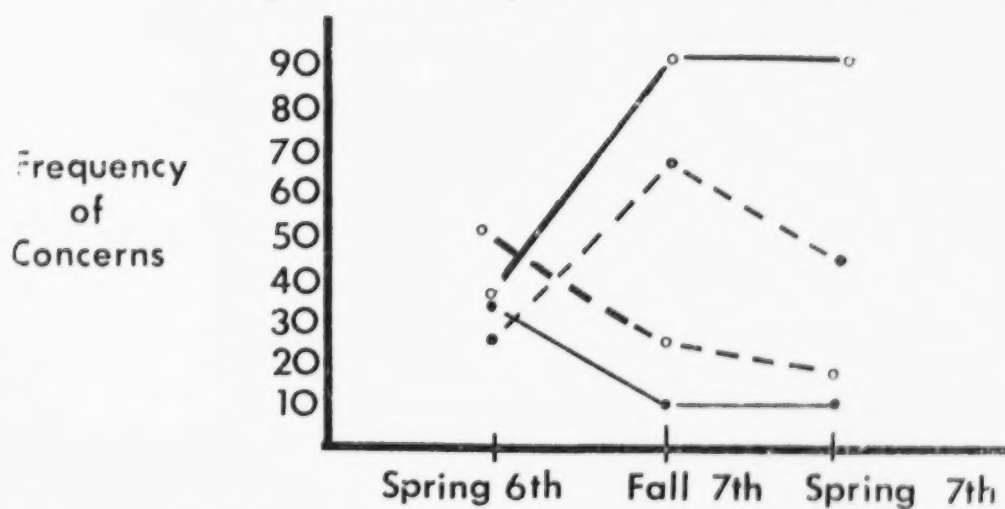


Figure 1b
Changes in Negative Concerns* (Boys)



* Peer Relations •—•
 Academics ○—○

School Setting ---•
 Victimization ---○

FIGURE 2

Changes in Positive Perceptions *

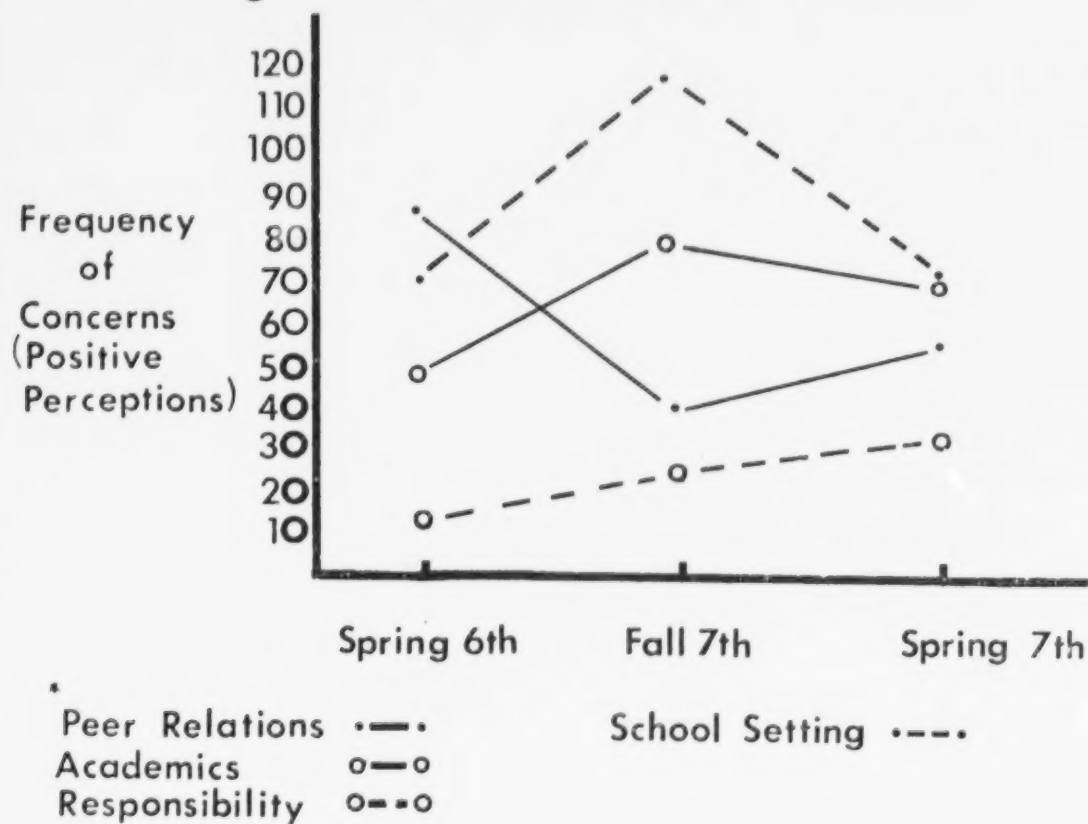


TABLE 1
RELATIONS OF STUDENTS' ADJUSTMENT TO THEIR
PERCEPTIONS OF JUNIOR HIGH

	TOTAL POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS	TOTAL NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS
ADJUSTMENT:		
<u>SPRING 6TH</u>		
GRADES	-.06	.34***
DISRUPTION	-.15	-.30*
AGGRESSION	-.09	-.22*
 <u>FALL 7TH</u>		
GRADES	.30**	.00
DISRUPTION	-.20*	.03
AGGRESSION	-.16	-.06

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

TABLE 2
RELATIONS OF STUDENTS' ADJUSTMENT TO THEIR
RATINGS OF JUNIOR HIGH

RATINGS OF JUNIOR HIGH (SPRING 7TH)

ADJUSTMENT:

SPRING 6TH

GRADES	.12
DISRUPTION	-.32**
AGGRESSION	-.37***

FALL 7TH

GRADES	.24*
DISRUPTION	-.31**
AGGRESSION	-.25*

SPRING 7TH

GRADES	.19
DISRUPTION	-.28**
AGGRESSION	-.25*

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$